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Rev. John D. Wells
18 Oct. 1893

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1869

Rev. J. A. Wells.
Delivered at Cambridge, Mass.,
on the 13th of March,

THE VALUE OF THE STUDY OF INTELLECTUAL
PHILOSOPHY TO THE MINISTER:

A N E S S A Y,

READ BEFORE

The Cambridge Association of Ministers,

FEBRUARY 9, 1869,

BY A. B. MUZZEY.

BOSTON:

PRINTED BY EDWARD S. COOMBS.

1869.

THE VALUE OF THE STUDY OF INTELLECTUAL
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FEBRUARY 9, 1869.

Artemas Powers
BY A. B. MUZZEY.
—

BOSTON:
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Rev. John D. Wells (57)

E S S A Y.

It is quite common in our day to speak of metaphysics in a tone of disparagement. As compared with positive philosophy, and even with physical science, it can prove nothing, we are told. It is not, like mathematics, a science, which can move on from step to step on solid ground, and reach at last definite results and certain conclusions. It consists of mere speculations and theories, and of system after system, in interminable conflict and endless controversy.

I wish now, without stopping at this point to answer these and other objections to this science, to say a word in its favor. Admitting, for the present, that some of the objections referred to are well founded, I can see no good reason for its being placed under a ban, or treated with disrespect, or with neglect or indifference. As a mere matter of history, it deserves a better treatment. Be it that we cannot arrive, in its study, at the certain conclusions of the pure mathematics, or of the physical sciences, no one can claim a thorough knowledge of human history, who has never informed himself in regard to the various systems of philosophy advocated by the long line of master minds, from Aristotle and Plato down to Hamilton and others of our own age.

But, not to dwell on the need of this knowledge to the student in general, I am now to speak of its special advantages to the minister.

The first of these is, that it is essential in order to acquaint the mind with its own powers and faculties. It is a province of the preacher to deal with the human mind. How can he do this with the utmost success if he does not know all that is within his grasp, of the nature and constitution of the human mind? This is the very instrument he must use in his special work; and may he content himself with a superficial acquaintance with it? The surgeon studies the precise character of the instruments he is to use in his manifold operations. The least ignorance in this respect, might lead him, at a single stroke, to destroy that very life it is his office to save. You would not trust a carpenter to build your house, who told you, at the outset, or showed by his work, that he had never studied the powers and precise adaptations of the tools in his chest. Is the preacher to spend no time in the study of his great instrument? May he content himself with a partial, hap-hazard knowledge of the nature, functions, and capacities of the mind? On the contrary, almost as soon may the professed teacher of intellectual philosophy, be excused in a neglect to arm himself at all points in his department, as the minister who voluntarily seeks an apology for the lack of a thorough study of those mental powers, which, in every sermon he preaches, he is directly to address.

Next, this study is a prime aid in giving to the intellect new strength and increased accuracy. As a constant mental discipline, it should stand in the front rank of our studies. I would not underrate, in this connection, any other branch of science, nor any field of literature. We do well to keep alive our knowledge of the classics, and to pursue the modern languages. History, the physical sciences, and especially mathematics, are of great service in this direction. But, meantime, the minister will derive special benefit from mental philosophy. It compels him to weigh carefully opposing arguments, and so to become a clear reasoner; it stimulates his imagination by opening new trains of thought; it aids

him to write in a fresh and independent manner ; and, emphatically, it constrains him to observe very slight differences between cognate ideas, and to keep within the limitations of truth, and so to avoid one of the great sins of the pulpit, a habit of exaggeration in thought and expression.

The preacher, unlike the lawyer, has no opponent before him to watch his statements and question him at the moment. This evil,—and it is a great one,—he may counteract largely by pursuing in his retirement studies suited to make him guarded and accurate in his habits of thought and his modes of expression. It is said Chief Justice Parsons, after the exhaustion of the bench, would sometimes take up a problem in mathematics, and find, at the same time, recreation and new strength from this change of mental occupation. It is good for the preacher to gather fresh energy by an occasional adventure into paths aside from his own beaten track. Among these none will reward him with clearer views and a higher spiritual zest than the science of the immortal intellect.

The study of metaphysics assists the minister in reaching true results in the science of theology. Mere theological argument is not suited to the pulpit ; but we cannot accustom ourselves too much to such arguments in the study. Sound logic can never be out of place there. We do not want sermons written in the "dry light ;" but we do want in this profession the intellect which can cope with all the increasing speculations of the age. We need a vigor and an acuteness which can fathom the false philosophies of the time, into whatever subtleties or extremes they may run. Would God we had some Edwards, not to give us his soul-chilling theology, but to grasp all these many-hued and often specious speculations, and place them and their results where they belong. On most minds, for example, the idealism of Berkeley must exert an unhappy influence, so far as their faith in the true God is concerned. And, to leave the apparent unity between mind perceiving and matter perceived in

effect undisturbed, which is attempted by Hegel, if not by Spinoza,— deducing, as he does, mind and matter from a common essential being,— is to blend indistinguishably God and the universe. There is little hope for the prevalence of a true theology except we first lay the right corner stone, which is Christian faith, and, with a mental philosophy joined to a logic clear as the noon-day sun, build our fabric up, course by course, to the very top stone,— workmén that no sophistry and no conscious negligence can make ashamed of their work.

We must have a true mental science to prepare the way for a sound moral philosophy. Before we can establish the right and true principle of conduct, we must comprehend the principles of thought. One should not undertake to teach others at large on matters of duty without the aid of the science of mind. Of course much excellent moral instruction may be given by the parent or other guide, who is ignorant of philosophy. But a public teacher who offers to lead men into the whole field of the right, the good, and the true, is bound to acquaint himself, so far as he can, with the whole nature, intellectual as well as moral, of those he addresses. We may have the bigot, the dogmatist, the fanatic, and the errorist in many forms, in the pulpit, without this broad training; and we have had them, and do have them in some quarters still. The church has no security against their intrusion short of a rigid mental culture and a thorough knowledge of the mind itself in its ministers.

We are to teach morals; and the first inquiry in moral science is for a sovereign practical principle of universal authority; one which shall comprehend all the maxims and all the motives of human action. To discover that principle, we must begin by being well grounded in that science which, as Stewart well expresses it, "is equally applicable to all those inquiries which have for their object to trace the various branches of human knowledge to their first principles in the constitution of the human mind." Among these several

branches is moral philosophy ; and, if metaphysics renders good service in the others, as physics, the mathematics, physiology, and language, it is of pre-eminent value as a preparation for, and an accompaniment at every stage in, the development of a sound system of ethics.

To ascertain the abstract right, to decide what in reality is the ultimate rule of human conduct, requires the power of analysis and a breadth joined to an acuteness of intellect. And, while going out into history, and attempting to master the various systems of moral philosophy, both in heathen and Christian nations, we find at every step our need of that patient self-observation, and constant and close discrimination between things apparently very much alike, which are fostered by being rooted and grounded in mental philosophy.

Without this attendant discipline we are liable to misapprehend many of our ethical writers ; to give too much credit here and too little there ; to confound schools, parties, and systems, which are essentially distinct ; to advocate conclusions which have no firm basis in truth ; and hence, in our haste, we may bind ourselves exclusively to one system or another. We can find much, for example, to approve in that of Aristotle, who made virtue to depend on happiness, and that again upon action. But we shall be satisfied that we cannot limit the development of virtue, as he did, to the State. Stoicism shows us much to admire in the heroic element it inculcates. Epicureanism, which places the highest good in pleasure alone, has its value as an offset to the sternness of cynicism. But, before we rest in Greek, Roman, or Hindoo, or any of the old philosophers, as the fountain-head of all modern virtue,—after the manner of some in our day,—we were wiser to turn to him who does not inculcate a mere escape from pain, whether by virtue or pleasure, as the supreme good, but teaches that, while we may accept and cherish whatever was right and pure in the pagan world, human nature can reach its moral heights only through the divine power which is revealed in his gospel ; through con-

Every attempt to identify the powers and processes of the intellect with those of the body, has signally failed. We are led in that direction by modern physical science into recesses and caverns, where its torch-light promises to unveil to us the great secret of the connection between mind and matter. But, just as we are taught to expect the marvellous revelation, our light goes out, and we are left in a hopeless darkness. Physiology promises, over and over, to explain to us the mystery of life; to tell us what life is, and show that it is only a result of certain material forces. But, in the midst of its proud communications, there comes a dead silence, and we hear from another voice the solemn mandate, "Thus far shalt thou go, but no further."

Now, without presuming that philosophy, in any form, is to solve all the problems of this kind that can be raised, it is clear that, when it enters the sphere of mind, it can help us beyond the point where physical science fails. We then start from a new goal. Mental philosophy, differing from those sciences which deal only with finite phenomena and proximate causes, begins with the suggestions of consciousness and the postulates of reason. Here we see the insufficiency of all mere material expositions. We are introduced to phenomena, belonging, it is true, in part, to sensation; but, beyond that, embracing the indefinable region of the operations of the intellect and the will.

And now we see the value of this study to the minister. At the late meeting of the British Society for the advancement of science, the President, in his introductory address, said, "the laws of nature are not within the religious teacher's province;" and, when considered and understood in their practical relations, they are not. But, he uttered another sentence pregnant with moral significance. "The laws of mind are not yet relegated to the domain of the teachers of physical science." It will be a dark day for humanity if they ever are. Still, who cannot see that there is a struggle in some quarters to bring about that very result? Positive philoso-

phy, if I understand it aright, aims to accomplish just this. It begins with circumscribing all the laws of nature within material boundaries ; it teaches that we have no reliable instrument in our search for pure truth except experience ; it excludes all the uses of psychology ; and, finally, it teaches the inanity of metaphysics.

But we can never succeed permanently in arraying physical science against metaphysics. The philosophy of mind has been well called "the self-knowledge of physical science." Both deal with phenomena, the one with the outer, the other with the inner, part of the same things ; and so they place in one line, space, time, substance, spirit, cause. Logic takes these up as subjective facts, and seeks the ultimate laws of all thought in regard to them.

Metaphysics would ascertain whether they are real, as well as objects of thought ; and finally, if they are found to rest on the ground of true existence, they are taken up by ontology, which attempts to reach the essence of the being of God, the soul and nature.

The present ground of enmity to mental science, is indeed utterly untenable ; since no one can reason on the mind at all without some metaphysical *status*. It is easy to say "causation is only constant priority," and that all causes are beyond the reach of science ; but such theories earlier or later refute themselves ; and their advocates show that they were only contending against a false metaphysics.

Wherever physical science, in our day, does not lead to a decided hostility to mental philosophy, it sometimes awakens a distrust of its value and reliability. We hear much of its vagueness, as if mind itself might be some figment of the brain ; and we are told it gives us no certainty of any truth. Talk of the certainty of matter, its laws and its decisions, and the uncertainty of everything else ! Why, in reality, the mind is the most certain thing in the universe. We cannot establish the science of ontology, or being in any form, without it. "*Cogito, ergo sum,*" is true in a double

sense. The science of the day, discarding this fact, leads us into an inextricable maze, as Martineau, in his late discourse, keenly expresses it :

" Our modern thought does not solve, but only despair of the haunting problems of metaphysics ; it makes no provision for any primary truth, but makes all our mental stores alike derivative, and that from sensible experiences common to us with the brutes ; but it may be surmised that intellectual curiosity may yet rise in discontent, and reclaim its natural range,—that the device will not permanently succeed, of shutting up vast chambers of human thought and labelling them empty."

Paul was as good a metaphysician as he was theologian, when he affirmed, " We look not at things seen, but at things not seen ;" and when he pronounced the one " temporal," the other alone " eternal." When the theist affirms that the ultimate principle of the universe, is God, he has the same advantage as the materialist. God, he says, the omnipresent and omnipotent will, is a thing, that is a power, " not seen." Call the ultimate principle of the universe what you please, resolve it into force alone,— that is a thing " not seen ;" so that materialism derives no aid from the word force.

The progress of modern science confirms our conclusion. In the earlier ages there was a disposition to advocate a multiplicity of forces. This tendency is the parent of our long list of mechanical, chemical, vital, and mental forces. But a better philosophy is fast reducing their number. It is apparent that, as all force necessitates consciousness in its exercise, both physical and metaphysical investigation must conduct us at last to the conclusion that all force is of one essence, and that that essence is not matter, but mind.

It may be said, the minister can reach this and similar conclusions, practically, without a knowledge of philosophy. True, he may ; and a firm religious faith and strong good sense are better than all mere philosophy. But no one will deny that it is a great help in encountering the false philosophies, here opposed to and there connected with religion, to be able to put in their place a true philosophy. When Paul en-

countered the Stoics and Epicureans, I do not believe he regretted his knowledge of the science of the human mind. Set aside his inspiration, and who can doubt that his rare mental discipline, gained by a knowledge of the "wisdom of this world," fitted him all the better to preach the wisdom which was from God? If the culture of the Greeks and Romans could be met, in its errors and sophistries, only by an equal culture in the great teacher of the Gentiles, so does the growing mental culture of our age demand of its ministers the very highest intellectual training and the fullest knowledge of the powers and operations of the mind itself.

We have now a philosophy of everything. Our schools and colleges and the press are spreading knowledge as never before among the people. And they are often swept away by specious and delusive theories under the names of "free religion," "absolute religion," and "universal religion," and by the fallacies of a so-called science of nature. How can we meet these errors, and shun ourselves the dangers of superficial and sophistical modes of reasoning in these high matters, without both a thorough knowledge of physical science and a thorough acquaintance with every power and faculty of the human mind? If we are to "add to our faith, virtue," we must also add to our "virtue, knowledge."

I have spoken of faith; and it may be said that will suffice us, why care for philosophy? I answer, this is not a matter that is optional with us; every one, in reality, has a philosophy, and must have one, either consciously or unconsciously. That is, we all explain phenomena by referring them to some ultimate cause or causes. There are tendencies in every one's mental and moral constitution toward some particular systemization of the forces and laws of what we call nature, whether seen in God or man.

It may be said, however, that all such tendencies are to be guarded against by the minister. He is not to meddle with metaphysics, lest he expose himself to false systems, and so imperil his faith, or in some other way endanger the

success of his work. But is there no danger in ignorance on this subject? Far better to know, for ourselves, the whole ground over which we are moving, than trust to one or another, who may chance in our way, for direction. We may have fortunately a peculiar sagacity, by which we can reach right rules of action without knowing any of the reasons on which they rest in the nature of things. But to trust to results thus reached, is never safe. It is often to insist that, by the unaided eye you can supersede all the uses of the microscope or the telescope in the field of human vision. It is to subject one's self to the errors of the self-willed dogmatist or the ignorant and pitiable bigot. Our only security is to know things as they really are, and not content ourselves with seeing them, as, when superficially observed, they appear.

The minister, of all men, needs a thorough knowledge of himself. But how can this be acquired? Only by mining into the depths of his own nature, intellectual as well as moral. As he pursues this investigation, he will more and more see, that, according to the maxim of Socrates, self-knowledge is the condition and the complement of all other knowledge. He will become assured that, to be thoroughly furnished for his task, he must cultivate an habitual introspection; and that, employing all the lights within his reach, whether borrowed from ancient or modern writers, from heathern or Christian quarters, he must explore completely the latent recesses, and comprehend the wealth, of his own interior world.

Why should any one try to repress these tendencies, and to silence all inquiry in this direction? Why imagine that faith and science are in some way in conflict, and that all we have to do is to exalt the one, and ignore, or nullify, the other? It is the part of wisdom, rather, in an age of speculation and theories, of doubt on this side and credulity on that, to cultivate such habits of thought as will qualify us to form distinct and independent opinions for ourselves on the

great issues of the times. For a teacher of religion, to disparage an interest in, and pursuit of, philosophy, is, as it seems to me, to throw himself into the hands of his enemies ; it is to commit mental, not to say moral, suicide.

The minister needs the help of intellectual science as a counterpoise to the present tendency to secularize religion. We can see in many quarters a disposition to postpone the claims of the church, and to give other powers and forces the ascendancy in all human affairs.

Now the danger is that the minister will lose both his mental and his moral vision in an atmosphere like this. He is in peril, being of necessity in the world, of becoming of the world ; of lowering himself to its false maxims and debasing standards of thought and conduct. It is easy for him, both in the study and the pulpit, to abate something of the stern demands of our higher nature, and to forget its supremacy.

Insensibly he may come down from the mount of transfiguration, however delighted while there, only to accept doctrines and principles that are full of the views and influences of secularization ; and to say, practically, What is a man profited if he save his own soul, and lose the whole world ?

Physical science leads us all in that direction. It so multiplies our comforts and meets our manifold wants, that we are liable to sink, under its soft and soothing influences, into a treacherous materialism. So grateful are we for these increasing luxuries for appetite and sense, that we may unawares forget that " man cannot live by bread alone." Unless we keep the mind determinately uppermost in our scale of possessions, and, by intense study, comprehend more and more of its true nature and its transcendent worth, we shall worship these " idols of the tribe," and be swept at last into the current of a moral declension and death. And that way lie a soulless pantheism, and, in the end, a practical, if not real, atheism. Now, more than ever, we should say, therefore, with Bacon, " We humbly beg that, from the unlocking

of the gates of sense and the kindling of a greater natural light, nothing of incredulity or intellectual night may arise in our minds toward Divine mysteries."

The basis of all true religion will be found to be a theology which is justified by science. Our knowledge of divine truth must harmonize with the preception of relations; it will be extensive if these are seen to be multiplied, and will be profound only so far as we perceive the true relations between God and man. We can comprehend the religion of Christ as a divine movement only so far as we take in all its bearings in regard to the powers and progress of the human mind. When we see what it is in itself, and what it has done and is doing for society and civilization, we rise to a just conception of its rank among the philosophies, as well as the faiths, of mankind. And we then receive it with a homage above the assaults of scepticism; and we are the more earnest, no less than enlightened, in the noble work of its diffusion on earth.

The age is advancing,—we can see it in every denomination and every direction,—toward a more perfect reconciliation of reason and religion. It is manifest on all sides that Christianity, without abandoning its old defences, must seek new and still stronger ones, by proving itself in entire harmony with the progress of science and the deductions of a sound philosophy. He who would now succeed in commanding it to the world, must show its adaptation to the growth of the human mind. By no bald dicta, no unexplained authority, no reliance on the ignorance of those he addresses,—least of all by any timid subterfuges,—can he hope to entrench this religion in the mind and heart of the present day. If he cannot meet openly and boldly the honest intellectual demands of the age upon our faith, if he gives evidence of a dogmatic temper, not willing to listen to and weigh all that is reverently uttered against as well as for his own favorite opinions and prepossessions, he is not a teacher for the times. The more clearly any one can demonstrate the inherent truth and power of Christianity, by opening up the depths of the soul

and convincing men that the laws of the human mind and the laws of the divine mind converge in this religion, and that this, and no other, is to be "the everlasting gospel," the stronger are his credentials as an able minister of Christ. Let him not then fear the light of a true philosophy, but seek more and more of its God-sent rays, to shine upon, enlighten, and invigorate his own powers.

Mental philosophy is needed by the minister in the midst of the popular cry that "Religion is a practical thing; it consists only of work." Sometimes this language is used in opposing the need of prayer. "Why," it is asked, "call upon us to address God at set times or in any form of words? All we have to do in this world is to work." "To labor well is to pray." And, again, it is assumed that Christianity does not concern itself at all with one's belief, that doctrines are of no consequence whatever.

"For modes of faith let graceless bigots fight,
His can't be wrong whose life is in the right."

Beyond question the life is the great thing; character is immeasurably above creeds. But who is to say that the life has no connection with the opinions; or that the one is not clearly the root of the other? Of course many elements beside belief enter into the foundations of character, as education, circumstances, country, friendship, and the like. But every one of these influences may be traced back, or could be, had we the insight and the power required for it, to some mental process and some definite opinion, formed, cherished, and acted out, by some human being.

No church, Catholic or Protestant, conservative or liberal, ancient or modern, was ever built up except on a belief in one thing or another. And the church or the denomination which tries the opposite experiment, will be, sooner or later, either lost in the fogs of mysticism, or wrecked in the sands of indifference and spiritual inaction, or on the black rocks of practical, if not avowed, scepticism, infidelity, and final atheism.

The true safeguard of the age, so far as we, brethren, are concerned, is that we be established in a faith that is wedded to philosophy. Christianity, we are often told, is a thing of the heart,—it is love, love to God and man,—and that is true. And so is it light; it demands of its ministers the broadest intellectual culture, ripe scholarship, the clear head joined to the warm heart. We do not want masters in metaphysics, who will bind us slavishly to their particular theories and systems. But we do want our divinity students to be able to grapple with all mental systems. This, I believe, will help them on toward a true theology, a sound basis in ethics, and a correct christology, placing Christ just where the New Testament does, at the head of the church, our confessed Lord and Master. Let us then, old and young, and at every stage of our ministry, up to the last, watch with eagle eye against the intrusion of a false philosophy into the province of religion; while we welcome, and do all we can to advance, a philosophy that is true, one that, harmonizing revelation and science, is, in the highest and best sense, broad, free, and progressive.

